

Willie Nelson
Country Music (Rounder Records)

by Peter Stone Brown

Willie Nelson has recorded, and continues to record, so many albums at what seems like an incredible rate of speed that it is not only difficult to keep up, but discern which albums are worth it. However, every once in a while and sometimes more than once in a while, he'll deliver a new album that sounds out not only in his own extensive catalog, but of what's out there in general.

Country Music is one of those albums. Now some people might wonder why Nelson would title an album country music, since he is generally considered to be a country singer. Nelson, however is way more than that. Like Bob Dylan, Merle Haggard, and some other musicians who are not necessarily songwriters such as Ry Cooder, Nelson is one of the great purveyors and explorers of American music. In Nelson's case, he's rather fearless about it. There's few styles or genres he hasn't touched at some point and few singers he won't try a duet with. It doesn't always necessarily work, but when it does, it's worth it.

The reasons for calling this album *Country Music* are obvious to anyone who's listened to country music for more than 30 years, or to those who haven't been around that long, but have bothered to go back and listen to what came before the current crop of so-called country singers. Country music quite simply ain't country anymore and hasn't been for awhile. It's become some sort of warmed over once upon a time California country rock with occasional twang and cowboy hats (though these days it's more often baseball caps) thrown in for good measure. (Now to be fair to the current crop of country singers, Willie Nelson wears baseball caps too. In fact dozens of them which he'll toss out to rapturous fans during shows.)

On *Country Music*, Nelson revisits songs from another time or place but does so in a way that never seems like retro or even a tribute. Quite simply, he makes the songs live. He's backed by the same ensemble throughout, with maybe the fiddle player changing on a couple of songs here and there, which gives the album a unified feel and sound. On the surface, it would appear to be a bluegrass ensemble, with a steel player, and Buddy Miller's very subtle electric guitar, the only electric instruments. A fiddle, banjo, harmonica (by Mickey Raphael, the only member of Nelson's regular band to appear here) and Nelson's guitar dominate the sound. But this is not bluegrass though it touches on it. But it also touches on old time

music, Western Swing, honky-tonk, Hank Williams and Jimmy Rodgers as well. It is not twangy country, nor do these songs have the clever hook lines that became the standard for country songwriting in the '60s whether in Nashville, or with Buck Owens and Merle Haggard in Bakersfield. (According to news reports this weekend, an album visiting that aspect of country music is next on Nelson's agenda.)

Producer T Bone Burnett does a masterful job in what sounds like a hands-off production. Instead of putting any kind of signature sound stamp on the album, he does what the great producers used to do, follow the lead of the music, assemble the right group of musicians, and let the music create its own ambiance.

Nelson includes only a few bona fide country hits or standards, such as "Satisfied Mind," "Dark As A Dungeon," and the George Jones/Ray Price classic, "You Done Me Wrong." But more often than not, it's the lesser known songs that are the meat of this record with the standards stopping by like an old friend in new clothes. That said, Nelson's version of "Dark As A Dungeon," is one of the most deeply renditions of this song I've ever heard, going all the way back more years than I want to remember to the first version I heard by Cisco Houston on some ten-inch Folkways album my parents had.

This album though isn't necessarily about song selection though Nelson's choices are stellar. It's more about the feel and the tapestry of sound the musicians weave, the way the fiddle sneaks in and around the banjo and the mandolin, with the steel riding behind and on top, and the harmonica behind it all of it, at times emerging with an accordion-like sound.

For his part, assuming this was recorded last year, at 76, Nelson turns in some of the best vocals of his entire career, which is saying a lot. Many people don't get or appreciate Nelson's sort of matter of fact singing style, which is solely his own. Once you lock into it, the way he seems to start a song by what seems like talking, and then the melody sneaks up and hits you. It is an acquired taste, but once you lock into it, the realization sets in that his sense of timing, and his sense of phrasing is brilliant. Nelson's great trick is his approach is so subtle, that he can come across as offhand or dispassionate, until you start listening and realize his music is the exact opposite.

If there has to be a standout on the album, my favorite track is the traditional (for lack of a better word) hymn, "Satan, Your Kingdom Must Come Down," which is somewhere in mythical Dock Boggs musical territory. Nelson's voice is downright spooky, complimented by Jim Lauderdale (who delivers eloquent harmonies throughout the

album) backed at first by a banjo and bowed string bass, and a lurking harmonica in the background. Nelson sounds as solitary as any windy Texas plain, and the song builds in tension, as the bass switches to single syncopated notes colored by Buddy Miller's lead guitar. Book-ending this, near the end of the album is Hank Williams' "Hand of Gold," where Nelson manages to channel Williams' feel without ever imitating. It's perfect, and if Nelson were to record an album of Williams song with this feel, I'd buy it in an instant.

The album ends on an equally spooky note with the somewhat bluesy (Nelson can always be counted on to make musical connections) "Nobody's Fault But Mine." The arrangement is built around Dennis Crouch's string bass, with Miller's guitar pure coloring that shows he paid close attention to Roebuck Staples. Nelson's voice is enough to put the fear of God in you and his guitar isn't far behind.

What ultimately makes *Country Music* an excellent album is Willie Nelson doesn't just revisit a bunch of great old songs, but gets into the heart of what made them vital to begin with.